

CROSSROADS

READINGS IN SOCIAL PROBLEMS

Kathleen A. Tiemann, Editor

A Custom Publication

**CROSSROADS:
READINGS IN
SOCIAL PROBLEMS**

**A CUSTOMIZED
SOCIAL PROBLEMS READER**

COMPILED BY

Diana Kendall
to accompany
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~~by Diana Kendall~~

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Preface

. . . There are, of course, different ways of looking at social problems, and...these perspectives reflect the tension that has existed since sociology first developed—the tension between concentrating on the problems of society, on the one hand, and on the development of sociology as a scientific discipline, on the other . . .

Earl Rubington and Martin S. Weinberg

Pearson Custom Publishing and General Editor Kathleen A. Tiemann are proud to bring you *Crossroads: Readings in Social Problems*.

Our highest goal in the creation of *Crossroads* is to give you the opportunity to show your students that there are ‘different ways of looking at social problems.’ A traditional way of doing this has been to expose students to central sociological ideas and examples of sociology in action through a book of readings. While *Crossroads* is a reader, it is anything but traditional due to the way it is being provided to you.

With *Crossroads*, we have endeavored to provide you with a rich and diverse archive of high quality readings in such a way that both professors and students will have easy and cost-effective access to the minds and ideas that illuminate and help explain some of the central ideas and issues in the study of social problems. Within *Crossroads* you will find over 270 readings—which we will update and expand yearly—from which you can choose only those readings that are germane to your particular course. No longer will you and your students have to be dependent on the standard large and expensive ‘one-size-fits-all’ college reader, which often includes more material than will be covered in the course, yet often also lacks those particular pieces that are viewed as essential by individual instructors. In addition, a classification system for each selection provides helpful information on how the selections might be organized to allow the various perspectives on the course to be pursued. Although

the primary course for which *Crossroads* was developed is the introductory social problems course, the size and quality of the database may also make it a good resource for a variety of other courses such as introduction to sociology, marriage and family, and gender studies.

However it is used, it is our ultimate hope that you will find *Crossroads* to be an essential source of readings in social problems—a source noted for its depth, breadth, and flexibility—that meets the highest scholarly and pedagogical standards.

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A project of this scope cannot be undertaken without the assistance and advice of our colleagues. The project idea and execution was reviewed several times as it was being developed, and each of the following provided valuable feedback and suggestions, which strengthened the project greatly.

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We welcome your feedback at any time on *Crossroads*. Please simply send comments and suggestions to www.dbasepub@pearsoncustom.com.

**CROSSROADS:
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SOCIAL PROBLEMS**

☉ GENERAL EDITOR ☉

Kathleen A. Tiemann
University of North Dakota

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☺ Annotated Table of Contents ☺

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Nickel-and-Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America5

Barbara Ehrenreich

Ehrenreich effectively captures what it means to be one of the working poor who, despite full-time employment, cannot make ends meet. The experiences set forth in this article highlight the persistent problem of economic inequality and its social consequences.

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White Racism: A Sociology of Human Waste30

Joe R. Feagin and Hernan Vera

Feagin and Vera describe how the widely-held ideologies and practices of white Americans who believe that they are not racist in actuality can support patterns of racism and discrimination. The topic of white racism is particularly relevant to our understanding of why racial and ethnic inequality persists in the United States.

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Running in Place46

Virginia Valian

Valian's discussion of the gains that women have made in the United States makes us aware that, although improvements in the economic and social conditions of some women have occurred, many other women have made few gains as they, in essence, have found themselves "running in place."

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Will Challenge the World's Economic Well-Being.....60**

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Mokhiber’s discussion of cracking down on corporate crime makes us aware that, unlike many people’s perceptions about crime, great economic and social losses occur through the criminal conduct of individuals in the top tiers of society.

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The decline of American cities is discussed in this article from *The Economist*, which shows how many problems in our cities are longstanding and in need of relevant solutions as soon as possible.

Nickel-and-Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America

BARBARA EHRENREICH

Is welfare reform the solution to poverty? Many people believe that it is, but Barbara Ehrenreich isn't so sure. She wanted to test the "humanistic rationale for welfare reform ... that work will lift poor women out of poverty while simultaneously inflating their self esteem and hence their future value in the labor market." To test this proposition, she left the comforts of her middle-class life to spend a month in the world inhabited by service workers. She discovered little there to increase workers' self esteem or to lift them out of poverty.

At the beginning of June 1998 I leave behind everything that normally soothes the ego and sustains the body—home, career, companion, reputation, ATM card—for a plunge into the low-wage workforce. There, I become another, occupationally much diminished “Barbara Ehrenreich”—depicted on job-application forms as a divorced homemaker whose sole work experience consists of housekeeping in a few private homes. I am terrified, at the beginning, of being unmasked for what I am: a middle-class journalist setting out to explore the world that welfare mothers are entering, at the rate of approximately 50,000 a month, as welfare reform kicks in. Happily, though, my fears turn out to be entirely unwarranted: during a month of poverty and toil, my name goes unnoticed and for the

“Nickel-and-Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America,” by Barbara Ehrenreich, reprinted from Harper’s Magazine, January 1999, pp. 37-52.

most part unuttered. In this parallel universe where my father never got out of the mines and I never got through college, I am “baby,” “honey,” “blondie,” and, most commonly, “girl.”

My first task is to find a place to live. I figure that if I can earn \$7 an hour—which, from the want ads, seems doable—I can afford to spend \$500 on rent, or maybe, with severe economies, \$600. In the Key West area, where I live, this pretty much confines me to flop-houses and trailer homes. . . . The big problem with this place, though, is the rent, which at \$675 a month is well beyond my reach. All right, Key West is expensive. But so is New York City, or the Bay Area, or Jackson Hole, or Telluride, or Boston, or any other place where tourists and the wealthy compete for living space with the people who clean their toilets and fry their hash browns.¹ Still, it is a shock to realize that “trailer trash” has become, for me, a demographic category to aspire to.

So I decide to make the common trade-off between affordability and convenience, and go for a \$500-a-month efficiency thirty miles up a two-lane highway from the employment opportunities of Key West, meaning forty-five minutes if there’s no road construction and I don’t get caught behind some sun-dazed Canadian tourists. I hate the drive . . . but it’s a sweet little place—a cabin, more or less, set in the swampy back yard of the converted mobile home. . . . Anthropologically speaking, a bustling trailer park would be preferable.

[But] I am not doing this for the anthropology. My aim is nothing so mistily subjective as to “experience poverty” or find out how it “really feels” to be a long-term low-wage worker. I’ve had enough unchosen encounters with poverty and the world of low-wage work to know it’s not a place you want to visit for touristic purposes. . . .

No, this is a purely objective, scientific sort of mission. The humanitarian rationale for welfare reform—as opposed to the more punitive and stingy impulses that may actually have motivated it—is that work will lift poor women out of poverty while simultaneously inflating their self-esteem and hence their future value in the labor market. Thus, whatever the hassles involved in finding child care,

transportation, etc., the transition from welfare to work will end happily, in greater prosperity for all. Now there are many problems with this comforting prediction, such as the fact that the economy will inevitably undergo a downturn, eliminating many jobs. Even without a downturn, the influx of a million former welfare recipients into the low-wage labor market could depress wages by as much as 11.9 percent, according to the Economic Policy Institute (EPI) in Washington, D.C.

But is it really possible to make a living on the kinds of jobs currently available to unskilled people? Mathematically, the answer is no, as can be shown by taking \$6 to \$7 an hour, perhaps subtracting a dollar or two an hour for child care, multiplying by 160 hours a month, and comparing the result to the prevailing rents. According to the National Coalition for the Homeless, for example, in 1998 it took, on average nationwide, an hourly wage of \$8.89 to afford a one-bedroom apartment, and the Preamble Center for Public Policy estimates that the odds against a typical welfare recipient's landing a job at such a "living wage" are about 97 to 1. If these numbers are right, low-wage work is not a solution to poverty and possibly not even to homelessness.

It may seem excessive to put this proposition to an experimental test. . . . But I am an experimental scientist by training. In that business, you don't just sit at a desk and theorize; you plunge into the everyday chaos of nature, where surprises lurk in the most mundane measurements. Maybe, when I got into it, I would discover some hidden economies in the world of the low-wage worker. After all, if 30 percent of the workforce toils for less than \$8 an hour, according to the EPI, they may have found some tricks as yet unknown to me. Maybe—who knows?—I would even be able to detect in myself the bracing psychological effects of getting out of the house, as promised by the welfare works at places like the Heritage Foundation. Or, on the other hand, maybe there would be unexpected costs—physical, mental, or financial—to throw off all my calculations. Ideally, I should do this with two small children in tow, that being the welfare average, but mine are grown and no one is willing to lend me theirs

for a month-long vacation in penury. So this is not the perfect experiment, just a test of the best possible case: an unencumbered woman, smart and even strong, attempting to live more or less off the land.

On the morning of my first full day of job searching, I take a red pen to the want ads, which are auspiciously numerous. Everyone in Key West's booming "hospitality industry" seems to be looking for someone like me—trainable, flexible, and with suitably humble expectations as to pay. I know I possess certain traits that might be advantageous—I'm white and, I like to think, well-spoken and poised—but I decide on two rules: One, I cannot use any skills derived from my education or usual work. . . . Two, I have to take the best-paid job that is offered me and of course do my best to hold it; no Marxist rants or sneaking off to read novels in the ladies' room. In addition, I rule out various occupations for one reason or another: Hotel front-desk clerk, for example, which to my surprise is regarded as unskilled and pays around \$7 an hour, gets eliminated because it involves standing in one spot for eight hours a day. Waitressing is similarly something I'd like to avoid, because I remember it leaving me bone tired when I was eighteen, and I'm decades of varicosities and back pain beyond that now. Telemarketing, one of the first refuges of the suddenly indigent, can be dismissed on grounds of personality. This leaves certain supermarket jobs, such as deli clerk, or housekeeping in Key West's thousands of hotel and guest rooms. Housekeeping is especially appealing . . . it's what my mother did before I came along, and it can't be too different from what I've been doing part-time, in my own home, all my life.

So, put on what I take to be a respectful-looking outfit of ironed Bermuda shorts and scooped-neck T-shirt and set out for a tour of the local hotels and supermarkets. Best Western, Econo Lodge, and HoJo's all let me fill out application forms, and these are, to my relief, interested in little more than whether I am a legal resident of the United States and have committed any felonies. My next stop is Winn-Dixie, the supermarket, which turns out to have a particularly

onerous application process, featuring a fifteen-minute “interview” by computer. . . . I am conducted to a large room decorated with posters illustrating how to look “professional” (it helps to be white and, if female, permed) and warning of the slick promises that union organizers might try to tempt me with. The interview is multiple choice: Do I have anything, such as child-care problems, that might make it hard for me to get to work on time? Do I think safety on the job is the responsibility of management? Then, popping up cunningly out of the blue: How many dollars’ worth of stolen goods have I purchased in the last year? Would I turn in a fellow employee if I caught him stealing? Finally, “Are you an honest person?”

Apparently, I ace the interview, because I am told that all I have to do is show up in some doctor’s office tomorrow for a urine test. This seems to be a fairly general rule: if you want to stack Cheerio boxes or vacuum hotel rooms in chemically fascist America, you have to be willing to squat down and pee in front of some health worker (who has no doubt had to do the same thing herself). The wages Winn-Dixie is offering—\$6 and a couple of dimes to start with—are not enough, I decide, to compensate for this indignity.²

I lunch at Wendy’s, where \$4.99 gets you unlimited refills at the Mexican part of the Superbar. . . . Then it’s off for a round of the locally owned inns and guesthouses. At “The Palms,” let’s call it, a bouncy manager actually takes me around to see the rooms and meet the existing housekeepers, who, I note with satisfaction, look pretty much like me. . . . Mostly, though, no one speaks to me or even looks at me except to proffer an application form. At my last stop, a palatial B & B, I wait twenty minutes to meet “Max,” only to be told that there are no jobs now but there should be one soon, since “nobody lasts more than a couple weeks.” . . .

Three days go by like this, and, to my chagrin, no one out of the approximately twenty places I’ve applied calls me for an interview. I had been vain enough to worry about coming across as too educated for the jobs I sought, but no one even seems interested in finding out how overqualified I am. Only later will I realize that the want ads are not a reliable measure of the actual jobs available at any particular